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Distributor says Oprah unlikely to dump talk show

By JAMES WARREN
Chicago Tribune

NEW YORK — Big-time television, like baseball, can be very lucrative if you're a .300 hitter. Last week, financial analysts heard just how cushy it can be if those hits are grand slams.

King World Productions Inc., distributor of *Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy!* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, detailed its prodigious success and suggested that, given limited opportunities for black women in acting, it has no fear that the "ambitious" Winfrey might take her money and run anytime soon.

The mere appearance of King World at the annual Paine Webber Inc. media outlook conference is a sign of changing times. A few years ago, it would not have been deemed a big enough player to merit an invitation to a five-day gathering that includes more old-line companies such as Dow Jones & Co., Dun & Bradstreet Corp., Time Warner Inc., New York Times Co. and Tribune Co.

Jeffrey Epstein, King World's chief financial officer, said the New Jersey-based distributor and syndicator of TV shows and feature films has introduced 10 shows since 1983, and while six died and one (*Inside Edition*) is evolving, the three megahits have produced more than $1.5 billion in revenue.

Indeed, the three hits accounted for 88 percent of the firm's $396 million in revenue in fiscal 1988. Net profit was $76 million.

And the next few years may justify an optimistic outlook. Epstein said the three shows already have a lock on a total of $960 million in license fees from TV stations through August 1993. In addition, King World receives one minute of advertising revenue on each *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy!* and two minutes on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

One analyst, however, wondered if King's economic bliss could be upset by a frequent human condition: restlessness. Could King handle a decision by Winfrey to leave for other endeavors, such as her acting career, an analyst asked Epstein.

"Oprah is very ambitious," said the King executive. "She wants to act in movies and TV shows," he said, noting that she has built a $20 million production studio on Chicago's West Side.

"There are not many great parts for black women," Epstein said, adding that Winfrey's only real avenue is to produce shows herself.

To produce shows herself, he said, she needs a lot of money. The best way to get that money is to stick with her daytime job, he said, for which she's contractually obligated to King World through 1993.

But much of his 45-minute presentation involved *Inside Edition*, a reality-based show inspired by *A Current Affair*. King frantically rushed the show onto the market last January to pre-empt other possible knockoffs.

Epstein said the growing success of the show in dozens of markets could imperil other syndicated shows in the time period between the evening news and the prime time schedule, such as *Hollywood Squares* and *Win, Lose or Draw*.

Trump nixes stars' deal

Houston Chronicle News Services

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — In light of recent local and national reports that entertainers Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. and Liza Minnelli have signed to perform at Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, Donald Trump acknowledged that negotiations were under way for these entertainers, but the deal ultimately proved unworkable due to the prohibitive cost.

"There has to be a point in time when an entertainer is paid a fair price for their services," said Trump.

"If we had signed these three artists to appear at Trump Plaza, Atlantic City's premiere entertainment center, for the amounts they requested, we would have created a completely new entertainment fee precedent that would have eventually proven detrimental to the industry," he said.

According to Trump, the three stars shared a mutual desire to perform exclusively in Atlantic City at Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino. Minnelli recently completed her final appearance of a two-year contract with Trump Plaza.

"We've enjoyed and appreciated our relationship with Liza over the past two years. We wish her, Frank and Sammy the best," he said.

Around Houston

Teens at the YMCA

Students in junior high school looking to develop leadership skills are invited to join the Teen Leaders Club of the Post Oak YMCA, 1331 Augusta. Meetings are held every other Wednesday at 6:30 p.m.

The Post Oak YMCA also hosts the International Club at 7 p.m. every other Tuesday. Activities include hosting students, cooking international dishes, attending the Houston Festival, holding fund-raising events and more. For information, call 681-1061, Ext. 23.

Volunteers needed

Volunteers are needed to work at the Palm Community Center, 5300 Griggs, entering data in computer terminals. Volunteers should be able to type 30 to 40 words a minute. Training is provided. Contact the office of volunteer services at 247-5498 for information.

New Year's Eve benefit

Rob and Catherine Mosbacher are honorary chairs and Brian Lynne Johnson chairman of "M*A*S*H Splash," a New Year's Eve benefit for the American Red Cross with a tropical theme at the Texas Club, 601 Travis. King Cobra will entertain. The dress is creative military or beach attire.

Tickets are $90 or two for $150, and include a breakfast buffet. For information, call the Red Cross at 526-8300.

Folk art classes

Folk art classes will be offered in January at the Deer Park Community Hospital, 610 E. San Augustine. Classes will be held Monday nights and Thursday mornings. For information, call 479-3002 or 479-3021.

Author reception

The Friends of Fondren Library presents a reception honoring Rice alumni, faculty and staff, and members of the Friends of Fondren Library who had books published in 1989. The reception will be at 7:30 p.m. Jan. 17 in the Kyle Morrow Room, third floor of the Fondren Library at Rice University. The authors will be available for discussion of their books. The public is invited. Call 285-5157 for information.

Literacy volunteers

Literacy Advance of Houston will be conducting a workshop to train volunteers to teach adults to read and write starting Jan. 27 in Bellaire. Workshops will be held 9 a.m.-4 p.m. for three days. Volunteers will be certified through Laubach Literacy Trainers. Call 668-2401 for information.

To submit items for this column, mail information to Around Houston, Features Department, Houston Chronicle, P.O. Box 4260, Houston, Texas 77210.

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